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The report, based on a six-month study as a participant-observer, discusses developments now under way in West Germany's Adult Education Centers movement. The article offers a comparative approach that takes account of trends in Europe and North America. It puts these developments into a philosophical framework, noting that Germany may provide a real-life example of the dangers of which such prophets of adult education as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and John Ohliger have been warning. There is a struggle to maintain balance between the liberal and the "practical." Interest in meeting economic needs has meant a move of the centers into consideration, planning, and some implementation of vocational training and professional upgrading. This, in turn, is having a deep influence on the climate of learning in more and more center classes. The trend in the German Adult Education Centers is clearly away from learning "as" experience and toward learning "from" experience. The latter is lauded as substantial and structured knowledge measurable as to the quality of standard achieved by the learner. Learning "as" experience is downgraded as dilettantism. The report is a questioning, disturbing account of what clearly is happening in Germany and of what could happen here. (Author/LH)

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Liberal Adult Education
Adapts to the Technological Society:
Case Study of West Germany's
Adult Education Centers
(Volkshochschulen)

by

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Abstract

This report, based on a six-month study as a participant-observer, discusses developments now under way in West Germany's Adult Education Centers movement. The article offers a comparative approach that takes account of trends in Europe and North America. It puts these developments into a philosophical framework, noting that Germany may provide a real-life example of the dangers of which such prophets of adult education as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and John Ohliger have been warning. This report is a questioning, disturbing account of what clearly is happening in Germany and of what could happen here.

"Ten Thousand Unemployed Stand In Line," reported the Schwäbisches Tagblatt of West Germany in January of 1975."¹ That unemployment had increased in the Federal Republic was no longer news to anyone. Most Germans were also aware that the unemployed unfortunately are often forced to stand in line -- even in numbers as large as ten thousand. So that wasn't news, either. What was news was the nature of the line in which these ten thousand hopeful residents of Düsseldorf stood. It led to the registration windows of the Düsseldorf Adult Education Center, or Volkshochschule.

"At 5:30 a.m.," the newspaper reported, "there was already a considerable line-up of education-hungry Düsseldorfers before the doors, equipped with camping stools, breakfast bags and thermos bottles. Three hours later the line was two blocks longer: over 10,000 people, among them many unemployed, waited in three lines for admission so that in the course of the day they could obtain one of the coveted tickets for the new semester of the adult education courses of the Volkshochschule. One hour before the close of registration at four o'clock 10,000 tickets were already sold. One hundred courses were sold out."

Such was the dizzying height achieved in 1975 by one of the West German Adult Education Centers in adapting its programming to the practical needs of practical people in economic difficulty. Yet, the Adult Education Centers had long been involved almost exclusively in liberal, non-vocational adult education -- education for the joy of the learning experience itself.² For this commitment the Centers had been looked upon patronizingly by progressive pedagogue and politician alike as institutions for well-heeled, middle class, elderly ladies who enrolled in courses that took expensive field

trips to the Acropolis in Greece or to the Coliseum in Rome.³ Here, in the stereotype of the pragmatists, the old ladies emoted over their cultural heritage but failed to achieve what so-called educational science had determined to be "substantial learnings." Now, however, in such examples as the Düsseldorf experience, pedagogue and politician could see that at least some of the German Adult Education Centers were attempting to change their programs and their image to meet the "real needs" of "the people."

The German Adult Education Centers movement has been changing its orientation and bringing it more into line with the zeitgeist now dominating European and North American adult education. The purpose of this report is to discuss and analyze this phenomenon. The article is based on six months spent in the Federal Republic of Germany collecting documents, conducting interviews, and engaging as a participant-observer in some of the activities of the Educational Centers movement.

This study will relate the situation in Germany today to developments in adult education elsewhere in the Western industrialized world, particularly England, the United States, and Canada. It will not accept unquestioningly what appears to be the attitude of the adult education profession generally that such support and involvement of "the people" as witnessed in Düsseldorf necessarily justifies the "innovations and reforms" in adult education that have apparently helped to elicit such support and involvement. Indeed, the so-called innovations and reforms will be shown to be nothing of the sort, merely the borrowing of by now traditional concepts of certain types of schooling. It will be up to the reader to decide whether the German experience

has an important message for him, whether the adoption of what will be described as the techniques and mentality of schooling into adult education is necessarily beneficial, and whether adult education in a technological society is best conducted in support of technology.

Centers Traditionally Committed to Liberal Adult Education

Like adult education in the United States, Canada, and England adult education in West Germany tended until recently to be considered an alternative to schooling, not simply an extension of it.⁴ As an alternative, the tendency was to reject such approaches to education as job preparation, examinations, accrediting, and professional upgrading; to leave that to the apprenticeship system, the professions, or the trade schools. Liberal adult education was the work of the German Adult Education Centers. The Germans then were similar to the English today in excluding vocational or professional training from their definition of adult education.⁵

The need for more public money in a time of combined inflation and recession, concern for the shifting labor demands of a rapidly changing technology, and perhaps fear of drastic action by the unemployed were among factors influencing leaders of the German Adult Education Centers to begin to change their attitudes and definitions. The Adult Education Centers today have emulated the trade schools by engaging in professional and vocational training. Again like the schools, they have begun to provide credit or certificate courses with final examinations, many of them taken by employees of industries that provide salary increases for such publicly-verified improvements in "qualifications." A number of the Centers are increasingly becoming more like schools for adults as they begin to move away from

occasional, informal adult education toward a more systematic set curriculum.⁶

The Centers are also seeking ways of avoiding controversy in their traditionally important political education classes in a more and more politically polarized West Germany. Like public schoolmen in North America, the Center leadership is encouraging its teachers to be "objective" or "neutral" in their programs of political education.⁷

Joachim Knoll, a professor of adult education at the University of the Ruhr and the leading analyst of adult education in Germany, has noted the effort in West Germany to integrate adult education into the overall school system. This marked, Knoll wrote, "a total break with the previous self-concept of adult education [in West Germany] which understood itself to be at a distance from the state, the school, and public education -- a break which will result in manifold administrative and other consequences."⁸ He pointed out that the Center commitment to voluntarism, a lack of prerequisites, and adult freedom in program planning might have to be reassessed if the institution were to seek to integrate itself effectively into the system of schooling and into such existing programs as employer-sponsored educational leaves.⁹ Knoll and many other leading adult educators in West Germany have strongly supported this break in tradition.

Knoll could join in the sentiments expressed by Halmuth Dolff, director of the German Adult Education Centers Association in Bonn. "Many a beloved tradition will have to fall by the wayside," Dolff wrote. "But this loss might be made up for by the awareness of being able to do more justice to all groups and sections of our people, and to come closer to our chosen aim of serving all citizens of our country."¹⁰

A series of national reports opened the way to these "innovative" breaks in tradition, particularly the German Council for Education's "Structural Plan for the Educational System" in 1970.¹¹ This report "abruptly," as Dolff described it, defined adult education as continuing education and coopted it "as part of the general system of education...." The syndrome has been similar in Canada with the Wright Report in Ontario and the Worth Report in Alberta.¹² The British Russell Report of 1973 essentially avoided this action, much to the disgust of many progressive British adult educators, by maintaining the distinction of adult education as apart from schooling and as "liberal" as opposed to "vocational."¹³

The Trend Toward Vocational Schooling

But in Germany the stage was set for a move by the Centers and other elements of German adult education to meet the more "practical" needs of "the people." Elitism would be swept away in adult education as patterns associated with progressive schoolmen came into effect. The Adult Education Centers were now part of a system of lifelong, permanent, recurrent, continuing education advocated by such international organizations as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The question remains, however, as to just how effectively this highly publicized concept is working in Germany? As with all such notions, the publicity almost always promises more than can be delivered. And the implementation takes a long time. Still, in light of the trends already noted earlier, some analysis is possible.

A basic assumption behind the tendency of the German Adult Education Centers to adopt or adapt some of the approaches of schooling is that by meeting the needs of more adults the Centers will increase their attendance and improve their service to the public and to the society. The innovations are, at least to some extent, increasing the institution's attendance, as witness the dramatic example of Düsseldorf. But the lines at Düsseldorf have seldom been repeated elsewhere in Germany. That January, 1975, experience was more an example of what could be, a possible portent of the future, than a reflection of current achievements of the developing Center policies.

Whether the gains are real or potential or merely illusory, the changes in Center policy have already had important effects in the institution. The desire to meet the real needs of "the people" has tended at present to translate largely into expanded effort to meet economic needs in a Germany caught up in the energy crisis, inflation, and particularly unemployment. Interest in meeting economic needs has meant a move of the Centers into consideration, planning, and some implementation of vocational training and of professional upgrading. This, in turn, is having a deep influence on the climate of learning in more and more Center classes.

The Centers, particularly those in the large cities, are increasingly being asked to broaden their responsibilities and to serve as trade schools for adults.¹⁴ As adults become unemployed, for example, they may wish to change their vocation or profession. To hold their jobs or to continue in their professions individuals may also be required to show they are keeping current with developments in their field or to enroll in courses that are in vogue with employers. These employers provide leave time, financial support,

and eventually salary increases for employees who learn certain subject matter. One of the most popular areas at present is foreign languages. The Centers are asked by student, employer, and government alike to provide official certification that the necessary knowledge and/or skills have been attained in such Center classes.

Ramifications of the Certification Responsibility

In meeting this expressed need for certification, the Centers have accepted the notions of assessment and examinations. Acceptance of these so-called innovations in adult education has resulted in a set syllabus that threatens to turn many local language teachers, in particular, into "teaching machines." The language classes have become primarily preparation for an "objective examination" developed, administered, and graded from a central source. So-called "quality control," or academic standards and "objectivity," are imposed upon this assembly-line production of skills and knowledge. While one can audit such a class, the auditor can only sit in. He can hardly influence the shape of the course as long as any of the other participants is enrolled for ultimate examination and certification. The syllabus and preparation for an outside examination are threatening to sweep from these classes most of the opportunity for truly humane liberal adult education and for meaningful student influence over content.¹⁵

The "success" of the examination-certification "innovation" in the Centers and its extension beyond the languages to other program areas is understandable. The certificate program draws participants. It meets the needs of employers and the state in providing controls on education they

subsidize. It enables people to enroll in Center classes and to have their costs reimbursed by employers or government. The Centers could well be the major West German institution to benefit from technocratic arguments in Europe, emanating primarily from Sweden, that urge governments to make adult education part of their national social insurance systems.¹⁶ In such countries the cyclically unemployed would participate in pre-paid adult education activities rather than engage in hostile acts against government, or so the technocratic theory assumes. If their examination-certification program helps to build their image as a practical, vocationally oriented, no-nonsense public institution, the Adult Education Centers may well be judged worthy of support by business and by public tax money and worthy of eventual selection as the major agency to administer any social insurance program in adult education in West Germany.

Such "innovations," however, are also having the precise deleterious effects on adult education of which the prophets of this field have been warning the adult education profession for the past several years. The turn toward traditional techniques of schooling, however adapted they may be to adults, has strengthened the tendency in German adult education to extend knowledge rather than to engage in the communication or dialogue of co-learning advocated by Paulo Freire.¹⁷ Cooperation of the Centers with business and government in attempting to meet so-called practical needs is resulting in that gradual erosion of voluntarism which John Ohliger has passionately urged colleagues to retain in adult education for the sake of human freedom.¹⁸ The trend in the German Adult Education Centers is clearly away from learning "as" experience and toward learning "from" experience. The latter is lauded

as substantial and structured knowledge measurable as to the quality of standard achieved by the learner. Learning "as" experience is downgraded as dilettantism. The tendencies in Germany exemplify the results of the failure to heed Ivan Illich's warning that the "balance of learning" is in danger.¹⁹

Efforts to Maintain a Balance

The andragogical struggle now in Germany is to maintain a reasonable balance between the liberal and the "practical;" between the experiential and the structured; between the informal approach and the schooling approach.²⁰ Leading the fight to maintain some sort of balance are the older Center directors, individuals with a commitment to Center traditions, people who tend to be thought of as "the old guard."

Representative of this group are Heinz Stragholz, director of the Köln Center, and Franz Rieger, director of the Munich Center. Stragholz could be classified as politically conservative. Rieger is a socialist. What links them is a deep love of learning for learning's sake -- a commitment to liberal adult education. They want their Centers to offer something more than what is immediately saleable as a commodity to the public. They want education to serve more than the instrumental purposes of businessmen and government officials. Rieger and Stragholz are, in the traditional German sense, "gebildet" -- educated, cultured persons possessing wisdom.

It is Rieger who is a moving force behind Munich's "Gesundheitspark." His Munich Center is making use of the costly 1972 Olympic facilities to provide this so-called Health Park. It is a "new form of 'medicine' for the

alienation, lack of exercise, and stress of big city life."²¹ Interested people can enroll in formal classes or drop in and stroll from one informal activity to another. Programs include breathing exercises, relaxation and meditation courses, healthy eating classes, conversations about sex, painting, Yoga exercises, ball games, group dynamics, exercise for people with heart trouble, meetings on how to stop smoking and how to lose weight, group sauna, instruction in the Japanese tea ceremony, and discussions on how to make contacts with people and how to deal with conflicts in everyday life.

Rieger seems to be trying to demonstrate that education for the mind, body, and soul is becoming increasingly important in a technological society. At the very time that many of the Centers are shifting toward the training and schooling of adults as adaptive cogs in such a society, far more crucial individual need may exist for more Health Parks and for more learning for learning's sake. The need may be for education that enables the individual to rise above and overcome the technological society in which he is involved.

Liberal adult education, however, is not universally favored even at Rieger's own Munich institution. One staff member suggested that the concept of "gebildet" had lost its meaning with the rise of the Nazis in the 1930's. "Where were the liberally educated people then?" he asked. "What good were all the programs of culture in the Educational Centers in stopping the Fascists?"²² The same argument, of course, could be used against all the other institutions of Germany, including the Christian churches. One wonders about the fairness of such an argument against liberal adult education.

The cultured "old guard" and the aggressive innovators alike are aware of reactionary pressures once again abroad in the Germany of today and the difficulties these hold for Center commitment to political education.²³ Hans Limmer, Munich Center political scientist, analyzed the Marxist approach to working class emancipation as relying on the overthrow of the middle class. "Liberal bourgeois ideology," he said, "maintains that no insurmountable differences exist between the working class and the middle class." In this ideology, he added, problems are to be overcome by educating the masses to bridge any difficulties and maintain capitalist democracy. He said a tension existed early-on in the German Adult Education Centers movement as to these ideologies. Today, Limmer said, Center personnel increasingly see themselves as functioning within a public institution devoid of any ideology. The Centers, he said, take a "non-partisan" approach. He admitted that the teacher had to strike a delicate balance in disclosing his own personal opinions while presenting the subject matter objectively and discussing alternatives. When asked if the drive for freedom from partisan ideology in its political education isn't a reflection of a liberal bourgeois ideological belief in the viability of a happy, harmonious community under existing conditions, Limmer acknowledged the possibility.²⁴ It was clear that Center personnel had a great deal more analysis to do before they could accurately claim to be conducting "non-partisan political education."

The Influence of the "Whiz Kids"

The wave of the future may be to do away with anything "controversial" at all. Certainly, that seemed to be the goal of several highly schooled

new Center directors in their late 20's. One of these was Peter Lehmborg at Garmisch-Partenkirchen.²⁵ He has shifted his small Center from a relaxed cultural operation serving largely retired elderly people to a slam-bang, practical, vocational, media-based learning center that draws a bigger and more varied clientele. Lehmborg has increased the Center's income some seven-fold in five years. He has worked from sixty to seventy hours a week in equipping and engineering a technologically elaborate language laboratory and in convincing the small industries and army mountain division commander in his area to rely on his Center to provide vocational training for their employees and troopers.

Lehmborg insisted that political education had no place in his technocratic institution. Free-wheeling discussion of politics, economics, and religion could menace his good relationships with business and with the military. Lehmborg's operation at Garmisch-Partenkirchen reflected in microcosm what "the old guard" feared might be the direction of the future in the Centers movement.

Lehmborg was one of the "whiz kids," as Center advocates of liberal adult education termed them, who are moving the Centers from culture to technocracy. These innovators value vocationalism and technicism over liberal adult education which they see as a threat to their innovations and even to themselves. The moves toward technicism seem to be appreciated by the power structure in a Germany trending to the political right.

The "whiz kids" argue that they are making their German Adult Education Centers more relevant. But relevant to what? To the maintenance of an orderly society? To adapting people to life in a dehumanized technological

society? One wonders, too, whether "innovating" the traditional mentality and techniques of schooling into the Centers won't dehumanize the adult education process itself. Certainly, what Illich calls "the balance of learning" is in jeopardy in the Centers, as it is in North America where the impact of government-sponsored Adult Basic Education programs is exerting an influence similar to that exerted by the "whiz kids" within the Centers. It would seem that this important balance of learning becomes threatened in direct proportion to the extent that adult education shifts from a role as an alternative to schooling to one as an integral part of schooling.

Should adult education in a technological society have a heavy vocational orientation in support of technology? Or should it balance such training with a more humane liberal adult education that helps the individual transcend and transform his technological society? Can a single adult education organization like the Adult Education Centers combine the liberal and the vocational? Or will the "practical" and popular vocational training -- supported by government and by business -- inevitably squeeze out the questioning, controversial, so-called ornamental liberal adult education? These are among the crucial issues now facing the German Adult Education Centers.

In the past a humanistic philosophy has pervaded the Centers. Despite such problems as the lack of funds and of status, the need to use many untrained teachers, and the necessity to meet in often unsuitable quarters, liberal adult education maintained its hold on the institution. This power seems now to be waning in the face of popular support for vocational training. It has proved tempting to the organization to take advantage of the situation. Yet, sparkling new Center buildings, increased status and funding, even better

trained teachers won't overcome a philosophy of education that dehumanizes.

In 1926 Eduard Lindeman described European adult education after World War I. "In Denmark, Germany and England....," he wrote, "classes may begin with the study of economic problems but before the learning process has gone far the vague consciousness that man does not live by bread alone becomes manifest; the demand that learning shall point the way toward what is euphemistically called the 'higher life' is never wholly submerged...."²⁶ One hopes that current trends in the German Adult Education Centers never become so strong as to invalidate this statement by Lindeman.

Footnotes

- ¹ Schwäbisches Tagblatt, Südwestpresse, January 27, 1975.
- ² Exceptions can be noted, of course, in the history of this locally controlled adult education institution. But the thrust throughout its history, and certainly after World War II, had been liberal adult education.
- ³ Interview with Hans-Dieter Teichmann, head of the Central Examining Board and head of the Volkshochschule certificate project, Pädagogische Arbeitsstelle, Frankfurt, April 9, 1975.
- ⁴ Joachim Knoll, Einführung in die Erwachsenenbildung, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), p. 73.
- ⁵ E.L. Russell, Adult Education: A Plan for Development, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1973), especially p. 1, paragraph 4.
- ⁶ Interview with Franz Rieger, director of the Munich Volkshochschule, February 10, 1975.
- ⁷ Hans Limmer, Munich Volkshochschule political scientist, in seminar at Haus Buchenried, Leoni, Bavaria, March 18, 1975.
- ⁸ Knoll, p. 73.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 184.
- ¹⁰ Helmuth Dolff, "Can the Volkshochschulen of Today Answer the Requirements of Adult Education for Tomorrow?" mimeographed statement produced at the Deutscher Volkshochschule-Verband headquarters in Bonn.
- ¹¹ Ibid.

- 12 Douglas Wright, et.al., The Learning Society: Report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario, (Toronto: The Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1972), and Walter H. Worth, et.al., A Choice of Futures: Report of the Commission on Educational Planning, (Edmonton: Queen's Printer for the Province of Alberta, 1972).
- 13 Some British progressives like Vince Houghton blamed the "narrow terms of reference," rather than the committee, for the preservation of what they considered these outdated distinctions in the report. (Vincent Houghton, Open University staff member, Milton Keynes, England, "Address by Dr. Vincent Houghton to the Association for Recurrent Education," April 15, 1975.)
- 14 It is important to reiterate that Centers are locally supported and operated and are responsive to local interests and pressures, as well as to this broader, more general zeitgeist. There may, therefore, be a number of exceptions to the broader trends noted in this article.
- 15 This interpretation of the Volkshochschule foreign language program is not the one heard from representatives of the German Centers. While there are critics within and without the organization, the official line is one of pride for an innovative examination system, a system that takes account of the practical needs and interests of adults and excludes esoteric cultural rambles into academic literature. Much of the well-meaning rhetoric is devoted to the need for any "systems approach" to be learner-oriented. The rhetoric, however, does not gainsay the reality.

- 16 Gosta Rehn, speech at "Access to Continuing Education" conference, Oxford University, July 1, 1975.
- 17 Paulo Freire, "Extension or Communication," in Education for Critical Consciousness, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), pp. 91-164.
- 18 John Ohliger, "Is Lifelong Adult Education a Guarantee of Permanent Inadequacy?" Convergence, VII:2, 1974, pp. 47-59.
- 19 Ivan Illich, Tools for Conviviality, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 61-71.
- 20 Interviews with Lothar Robak, Marl Volkshochschule, February 14, 1975, with Heinz Stragholz of the Köln Volkshochschule, February 17, 1975, and with Ötte Krämer, Haus Buchenried, Leoni, Bavaria, March 17, 1975.
- 21 Der Gesundheitspark im Olympiastadion Programm, Winter/Frühjahr, 1975.
- 22 Name of source withheld. This same staff member dismissed Rieger's commitment to the Gesundheitspark as the emotional excesses of a man with a reputation as a hypochondriac.
- 23 "West Germans Protest Degree of Security," Star-Phoenix, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, August 19, 1975, p. 21, and "Anti-Terrorist Law Passed," Star-Phoenix, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, January 17, 1976.
- 24 Discussion by Hans Limmer with a workshop group of German and British adult educators, Haus Buchenried, Leoni, Bavaria, March 18, 1975.
- 25 Visit and discussion at his Center, March 19, 1975.
- 26 Eduard Lindeman, The Meaning of Adult Education, Montreal: Harvest House, 1961, pp. 64 and 65.